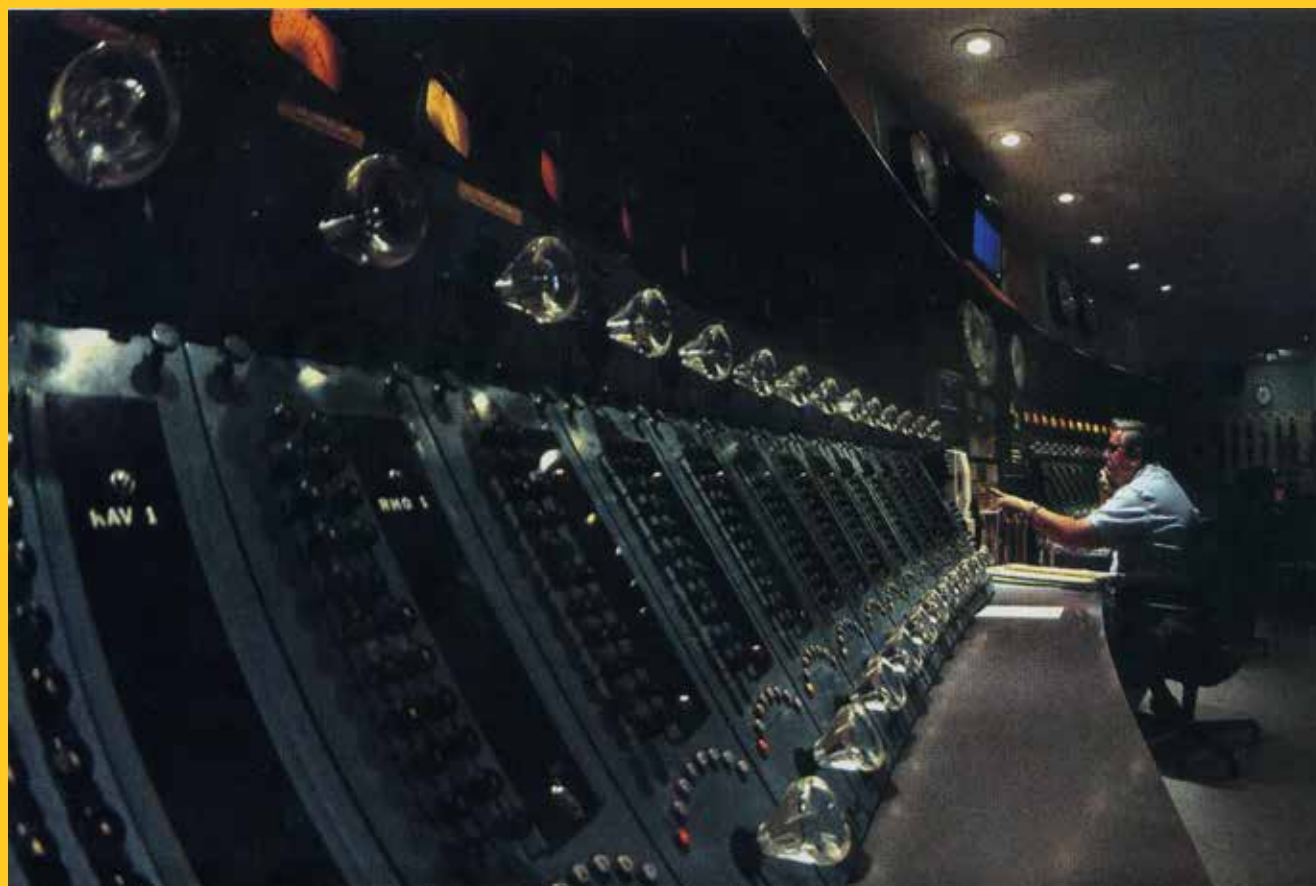


RADIOMAILMA

KANSAINVÄLISEN RADIOKUUNTELUN ERIKOISLEHTI

3/2025

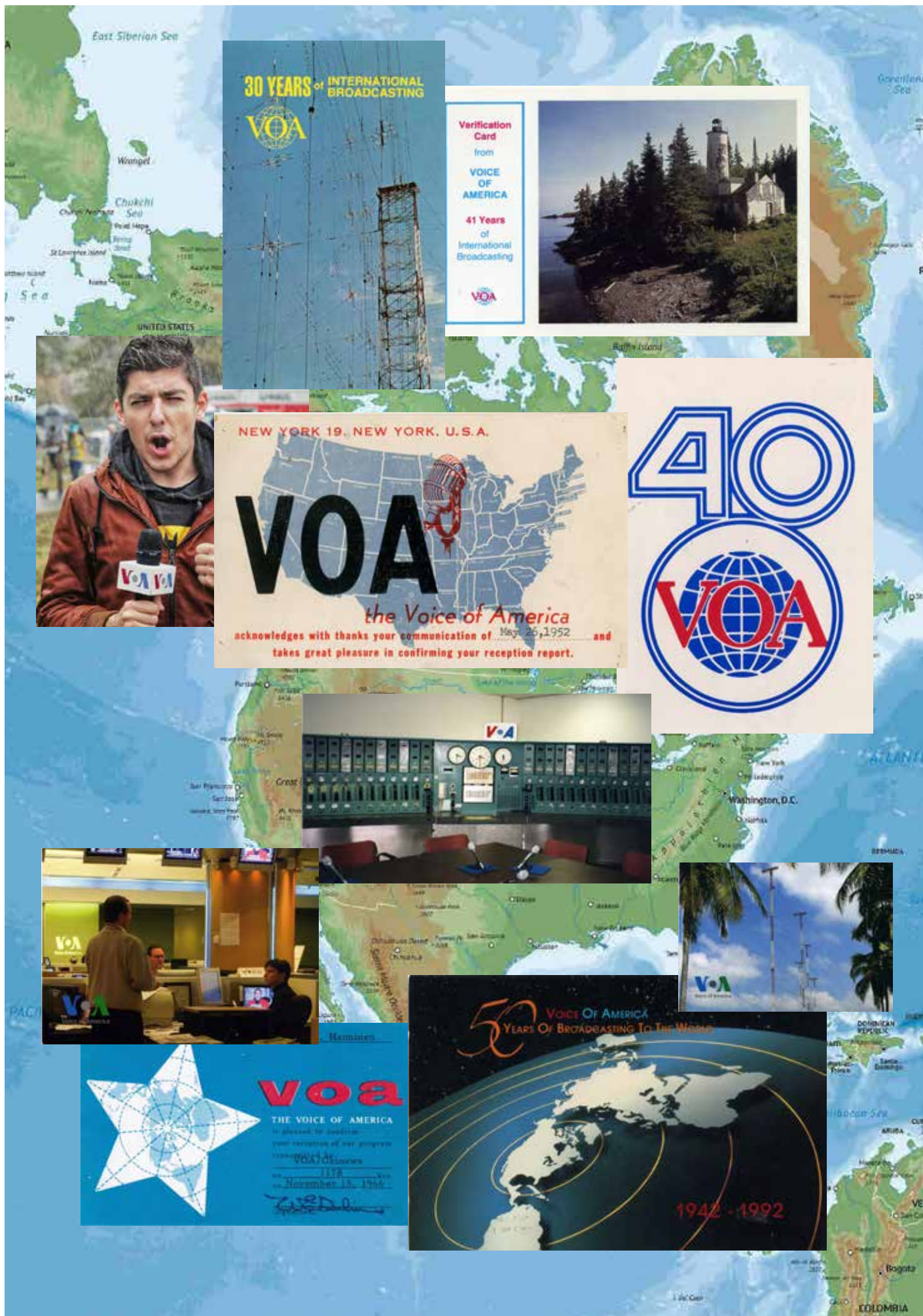


Voice Of America 1942-2025

Tuomo Vesala

TalkSPORT

Kesäkokoukseen littiin



VOICE OF AMERICA

Is VOA silent for good?

TEXT: JARI LEHTINEN, Lahti.



Voice of America has always been a bone of contention for politicians, from Joe McCarthy to Lyndon Johnson and now Donald Trump. VOA is the radio of the US Congress, but only as long as the US Congress is interested. It is unclear whether the Voice of America has a future, and if so, what kind.

After many committees, hearings, and reports, the VOA charter was created in 1975, emphasizing the independent nature of the radio station as a journalistically high-quality medium whose content is not subject to government control. This self-evident fact of Western mass media has driven President Donald Trump crazy. Trump does not want to govern so much as to be admired and flattered, and woe to anyone who does not accept this.

Of all the foreign services, VOA has always been in a class of its own. It has had the most transmitters, the most program hours, the most languages broadcast. However, the downfall of VOA has not been solely Trump's fault. It is clear to long-time VOA listeners that VOA has long been a shadow compared to best days. Shortwave operations have been severely curtailed, and the public has been pressured to listen to programs via streaming over the Internet. No one listens to those streams. Decision makers have opted to not understand that radio is not a podcast, and it is not used as such.

In its early years, Voice Of America was one of the

most important calling cards of the United States to the world. Its influence in the turning points of history is unparalleled. Just one example: In May 1989, when students held a tent village in Tiananmen Square, young people in Nanjing recorded VOA's Chinese-language reports on cassette tape, climbed the trees in the local town square, and from there played VOA news to the public, telling the Chinese what was happening in their own country.

Journalistic credibility, on the other hand, was already proven during the Bay of Pigs invasion, when VOA broadcast the same news about the failure of the operation that the Americans also heard, in Spanish, around the clock. In the case you happened to listen to the CIA-run Radio Americas on the Swan Islands, you would hear that the invasion was a perfect success and that Castro's end was only a few hours away.

Jamming

The VOA budget is well known. The US Congress approved it every year. In 2024, USAGM had a staff of 3,500 and a budget of \$886 million. This included Radio Free Europe, Radio Free Asia, Radio Farda, Radio Marti, and VOA. The amount spent by the Soviet Union and the Eastern Bloc on shortwave jamming is anyone's guess. The operating costs of 3,000 jamming transmitters were anywhere between \$0.5 and \$1.2 billion per year. No Western foreign service spent that much money on its operations in the 1960s-1980s.

Jamming was one of the good reasons to build the most comprehensive global broadcasting network possible. Congressmen had to be explained why the SW station could not be located on the border of the target, but rather much further away, and the idea did not really get through if the person in front of them was a block of wood, such as Joe McCarthy. The decision makers were given advertising leaflets promising how the radio signals of



freedom shot from different parts of the world would surround the oppressive empire and leave it defenseless.

The jammers concentrated on the big cities. Gaps existed in the rural areas. It was significant that the jamming only affected the native language broadcasts of the target area; Russian, Belarusian, Polish. English broadcasts were not interfered. Thanks to this, one VOA radio personality rose above the others, and his programs reached an audience of hundreds of millions.

Music USA

I wrote about Willis Conover many times in Finnish DX magazines. In this context, a few words about Conover's influence are appropriate. He more or less single-handedly turned the youth into DX listeners in the 1950s.

In the 1950s, urban youngsters discovered that jazz was cool, and the irritating youth in their flat hats began to listen to the infernal blasting in cafes, concerts, and on shortwave radio. In the memoirs of DX veterans from the 1950s and 1960s, it is regularly stated that Willis Conover introduced them to DX listening. Jyrki K. Talvitie, who organised the founding meeting of Finnish DX Association, made it a habit to listen to Music USA broadcasts from a different relay station each time and enjoy the music that was broadcast from the most exotic places, all the way even to the Mediterranean. Then one day Voice Of Indonesia announced on the neighbouring frequency.

In jazz circles, Conover was shrugged off because he was neither hip nor cool. Conover's understanding of jazz was frozen in the year 1950. On the other hand, to Louis Armstrong and Duke Ellington and their generation Conover was the government representative who knew what they had done and appreciated it. This didn't happen too often. On one of the USIA tours, Frank Zappa witnessed Duke Ellington humbly asking for pocket money from his manager. To Zappa this was a most

depressing sight. The man is Duke Ellington, and he has to beg for alms. Americans generally didn't appreciate their jazz musicians until they heard that in Europe they were hailed as geniuses.

Willis Conover remained unknown to Americans because VOA programs were not allowed to be broadcast to the American public. This law was a bit silly, considering the nature of shortwave, but it meant that Willis Conover was not heard on NPR stations, even if they had been interested.

The US Information Agency USIA could not have come up with a better PR man for its tours. Conover would also visit Finland on his travels, but of course the real success was experienced in Moscow. The hall of the Composers' Union was packed. People hung on the door frames outside the hall. Conover stepped forward, said "Good evening" in his inimitable voice, and received applause. Welcome was rather mild. The audience calmed down after just ten minutes.

Special English

In Finland, news in simple Finnish are regularly heard on the radio. They can be ridiculed as a radio for the hearing impaired, but they fulfill a certain need. In the 20th century, English teaching on a global scale was organized in schools in a simple way: typically it did not exist. The exception was the English-speaking former colonies, where English was taught in a manner of 1920's Oxford.

VOA's Special English introduced the basics of the English language using a basic vocabulary of 1,500 words. If an expression in a news text was not found in the Special English dictionary, it was rewritten as many times as necessary, until it was told in Special English.

There is a reason to claim that Special English was the most significant of all Voice Of America's inventions. VOA's listener mail was full of letters from rural China, each time telling exactly the same story: how the teaching at school was bad and VOA's Special English had opened up completely new worlds. Now I am an engineer in a

VOA AND I

TEXT: ANTERO PIETILÄ, Baltimore, USA.

The Voice of America transmitted to wartime Finland in Finnish 1942-45 and then resumed during the Cold War from 1951-53. Available evidence suggests that those broadcasts never found the kind of audience that BBC Finnish programs did, nor the believability. Interestingly, the VOA Finnish section was heavily staffed by people with links to Raivaaja, a social democratic newspaper in Fitchburg, Mass.

A mainstay was Professor John Kolehmainen, who authored a history of Raivaaja ("Sow the Golden Seed") and VOA/Finnish ("Amerikan ääni kutsuu Suomea"). A main reason for VOA's puny audience in Finland was that due to atmospheric conditions direct shortwave transmissions from the U.S. were unreliable. Therefore, an attempt was made to pick up the signal in England and have it relayed by the BBC. Sound quality was atrocious.

While I met several VOA correspondents during my work in Africa and the Soviet Union, my best discussions were with Piltti Heiskanen, a native of Finland whose Estonian was so good he became the head of the VOA Estonian section. We met when he served as the U.S. press attache in Helsinki. It was because of our contacts that one day in the 1970s, while I was a local reporter for the Baltimore Sun, I got a call from the VOA's head of European operations. He said I had been recommended as a candidate to head the Estonian section, presumably to lessen internal disputes among its staff. Our conversation ended quickly when I revealed that I did not speak a word of Estonian.

Another figure associated with VOA/Finnish was Esa Arra, a longtime voice on YLE, Finland's national broadcaster, who edited a small immigrant paper in Brooklyn, N.Y. While his story has never been written, the native of Finland first became associated with the American propaganda efforts in wartime Stockholm, Finland's window on the West.

Now that Trump is killing the Voice of America (and Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty), let's celebrate one of its heroes.

Willis Conover, who died in 1996, was one of the best known Americans in much of Europe, even though he was pretty much unknown in his native country (due to a stricture that forbade the airing of VOA programs inside the U.S.). That was because every weeknight he broadcast on the VOA two hours of popular music—"Standards," featuring swing bands like Benny Goodman's and Glenn Miller's, and "The Jazz Hour."

Except for Radio Luxembourg and a handful of others, pop music was scant on Europe's government-controlled airwaves in those days. Conover's programs attracted a huge audience, particularly behind the Iron Curtain where they were not jammed.

I saw Willis Conover once in Finland where his talk drew a big audience—and a standing ovation. Because of him, I am still a jazz retrograde, favoring the big band era.

In jazz circles in the U.S. Conover was a controversial figure because he tended to steer away from stylistic experiments that were popular particularly among cutting-edge Black musicians. At VOA, he was allowed to do his thing. He was a potent weapon in the U.S. propaganda arsenal. **RM**



large international company, etc.

It is actually no wonder that Special English was adopted by the Americans. Such a bold move against tradition would have been too much to the British. On the contrary, the British had made BBC English a standard of English language that could only be revised after years of diligent committee work, if even then.

Recent events

President Trump's order ended funding for USAGM, i.e. all US foreign services, on March 15, 2025.

The order has been revoked in federal court, and a judge ruled on April 22, 2025 that the funding must be restored and all those laid off must be reinstated. Many have since chosen retirement and other severance packages, and the situation is very unclear.

VOA has challenged the ruling that orders radio station Voice Of America to continue its operations like it would be a radio station.

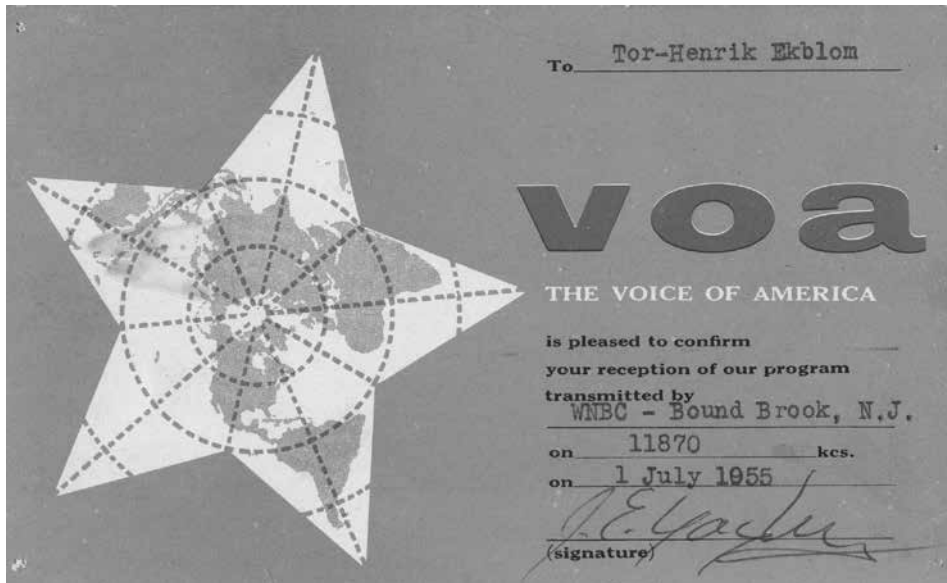
The staff in Greenville was fired in the end of May. Radio Free Asia is still broadcasting from Taiwan. Baltic Waves 1386 in Lithuania relays Radio Liberty for free.

Perhaps the end of VOA would have been only a matter of time. Naturally, Voice Of America was a relic from another era, a time when facts mattered, politics had substance, and reliability and predictability had value.

Above all, VOA was a tool for Americans to gain friends to their side. In this sense, scrapping VOA has been a perfectly logical move by the Trump administration. Trump has made it crystal clear that America does not need friends, nor does it need anyone on its side. **RM**

MEMORIES FROM VOA RELAYS

TEXT: JARI LEHTINEN, Lahti.



WNBC alias VOA Bound Brook, New Jersey, caught by THE, 1955.

Voice of America's global operations have brought many exotic radio countries to DX listeners that have been difficult, if not impossible, to catch with some other radio station. This is an incomplete overview of VOA's various relays over the decades.

AFGHANISTAN Wherever Americans land, American Forces Radio and Voice Of America seem to go along. When Afghanistan was conquered from the Taliban in the early 2000s, an efficient medium wave station was opened in Kabul on the frequency 1296 kHz. Not only VOA's Ashna Radio could be heard, but also Deutsche Welle and Radio Azad. Another medium wave station was set up on the Pakistani border in Khost on the frequency 621 kHz. This channel offered VOA Deewa Radio to the hearing ears. Responses to the reports arrived to me in the same envelope from Washington. Shortly after this, in 2021, the Taliban had enough of the heaven and returned to Kabul to change the broadcast to a more orthodox format.

BANGKOK During the Vietnam War, it became important to shape the mood in Southeast Asia. In 1969 was built on friendly soil in Thailand a 1000 kilowatt medium wave station, which has always been very well received in Finland. Programs produced by the Thai Ministry of Foreign Affairs have also been heard continuously on frequency 1575. In the 1980s, the station was called Voice Of Free Asia, which had nothing to do with Taiwan's foreign service of the same name. My answer to VOA Bangkok comes from this program. In the 2000s, the name was Radio Saranrom. The sudden closure of VOA has left Radio Saranrom without a radio transmitter.

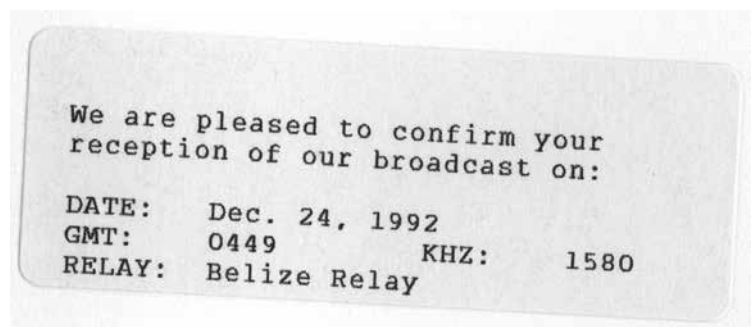
UDON THANI In June 1994, the largest Udon Thani transmitter center was opened in Thailand, with much fanfare, and it immediately received customers from both

VOA and the BBC. The \$120 million complex, built over five years, reached all of Asia, and according to the advertising, up to 40% of the Earth's surface. The station's main task was to transmit Radio Free Asia programs. In the 2000s, VOA no longer automatically verified every report and QSLs had to be destroyed in earnest. Udon Thani was an exception. It responded directly from the station with its own card.

Radio Thailand World Service rented program time from the Udon Thani station. Now that the station has gone silent, the programs of the Thai foreign service are broadcast in Bangkok on FM 88.0 MHz and on Facebook.

BELIZE VOA Punta Gorda opened in 1984. The station, grounded in salt water on the seashore, used 50 kW medium wave transmitters on frequencies 1530 and 1580. Despite promising specs, Belize was by far the rarest VOA relay in the Finnish latitudes. VOA Punta Gorda was eventually to be moved to broadcast Radio Martin's program to Cuba. However, the US government wanted to emphasize the Middle East as a target area, and so the Punta Gorda relay station was closed on September 15, 2002. I tried hard, I hoped hard, but I could not hear Belize.

BOTSWANA VOA Selebi-Phikwe was built as a medium wave station (648 kHz) in 1980 to fill the gap in coverage in South Africa. Radio Botswana broadcast from the mast during the day, and its coverage improved significantly. After the Liberian relay station was destroyed, VOA Africa's new short wave center was built on Moeping Hill in





VOA Europe: On back row Paul Anthony, Willis Conover, Terry Hourigan. At the microphone Carol Parker, Dan Alexander, ja Gary Murphy.

1991-1992.

COLOMBO In India, radio operations were a monopoly of All India Radio, but in Sri Lanka things were different. Radio Ceylon was a commercial short wave station, very popular in Asia, which easily became a partner for VOA. In 1951, it was agreed that Ceylon would begin relaying VOA programs, and in return, Ceylon would receive modern equipment from America, which was placed in Ekala, on the outskirts of Colombo.

IRANAWILA In 1984, the Sri Lankan government and VOA agreed that the outdated relay station in Ekala would be replaced by a modern complex, which would be built in Iranawila. The site had coconut palms, wasteland, and a village of 188 fishing families, who would have to move to make way for the project. The Catholic Church raised an uproar. Why are people living peacefully being moved from their homes because of American propaganda? After various complaints and stages, construction work only began in 1992. In 2017, the station's transmitter equipment was dismantled, and the property now houses a school and a community center. During the Covid period, the former VOA transmitter building served as a hospital.

DJIBOUTI A collaborative project with Radio Djibouti resulted in an efficient medium wave relay on 1431 kHz in 2002. Djibouti received a 5 kilowatt FM station and a VOA MW station to transmit Radio Sawa's program to the Arab countries. Getting a response from Radio Sawa was a bit tricky, because we were living in a period when VOA did not necessarily always respond, not even every time. I finally reached the technical director Gerhard Straub K6XH in Washington, who in email promised a card which never arrived. The Djibouti MW station has transmitted Radio Djibouti's programs with a shortened broadcast time.

KAVALA The Kavala relay station in Greece was once located near Thessaloniki between 1953 and 1972. Better space was

found on the Aegean coast in Kavala, where both MW and SW transmitters were installed. VOA Kavala operated until 2006.

This radio station has a special meaning for me, because the first QSL I received, confirming the report as correct, came from Washington. It verified that I had been to the Voice Of America via the Kavala relay station. I played it safe and I listened to an easy-to-report program. Of course, it was Willis Conover's Jazz Hour. What did you expect?

RHODOS VOA Courier was a radio station built on the Coast Guard cutter Courier, which was anchored off the coast of Turkey. It used balloon antennas and transmitted programs to Soviet territory. There is an article about the unique VOA Courier in Radiomailma issue 1/2022. Over time, maintaining the ship became too cumbersome compared to a land station, so VOA rented a plot of land from Rhodes and moved the Courier's medium wave transmitter ashore. VOA Rhodes, which was difficult to hear on the busy frequency of 1260 kHz, disappeared from WRTH in 2007.

KUWAIT The political upheavals in the Middle East gave VOA the reason to establish a radio channel aimed at Iran and the youth, Radio Farda, which was intended to encourage the youth to pull the beards of the conservative mullahs and throw the hijab in the corner. The Iranian youth have followed this advice and received a bullet in their skull. Radio Farda's SW broadcasts were mostly from the United Arab Emirates. On medium waves, Farda was all too sure to be heard from Kuwait on the frequency of 1548 kHz, where it appeared in 1996. Later, the program changed to Radio Sawa. The station has since fallen silent.

MOROCCO The Free City of Tangier was a fascinating nest of spies, schemers and smugglers. According to colorful estimates, one in four Tangier residents had reason to be wary of the police. There was also a lively shortwave activity there, which was not unnecessarily restricted by bureaucracy, whether it was



100 kilowatt General Electric -short wave transmitter in Okinawa, 1968.

the evangelism carried out by IBRA or the advertising programs of Paulig and Dux. Voice Of America found Tangier an ideal location for a transmitter station as early as 1949. In time, it became cramped and the target audience also changed from Eastern Europe to Africa. A new transmitter center in Breich replaced Tangier in 1993. It operated until 2008.

MONROVIA Africa was one of the fiercest theaters of the great powers' struggle for hegemony, and the Monrovia relay station was set up in Liberia in 1952 to support the Americans. By 1963, the situation had reached such a point that listeners in the newly independent African countries were served by a separate African service, VOA Africa, for which Monrovia was naturally chosen as the base. The new, gleaming complex of six SW transmitters replaced the old, low-power medium-wave station.

VOA Monrovia was destroyed in the Liberian civil war. 4,000 Africans fled the fighting to the VOA compound in the hope that American property would not be touched. On September 17, 1990, the station was attacked and looters took everything that was not nailed to the floor.

For a change, I never reported VOA Monrovia. Instead, I received a response from United Nations Radio, whose programs were sent to Africa via Monrovia.

MUNICH For some reason, longwave transmissions were not jammed. This was exploited by the Erching longwave station, which transmitted VOA programs on 173 kHz from 1953 to 1973, after which it was replaced by the Ismaning mediumwave station on 1197 kHz. Ismaning broadcast in Eastern European languages until the early 1990s. In the final phase, VOA Europe was established with great publicity, bringing together the cream of VOA's English-language broadcasts, starting with Willis Conover, and broadcasting Kasey Casem's American Top-40 at night. VOA Europe was abruptly shut down in 1997 without explanation.

OKINAWA One of the peculiarities of World War II was the fate of the Ryukyu Islands. The unique ancient kingdom was kept under American occupation until 1971. For this reason, the area gave its own country point in DX rankings. The Ryukyu Islands could be considered Japan's Porkkala; a pawn that guaranteed the victor of the war a favorable administration.

The first replies from VOA's Okinawa shortwave station arrived in Finland as early as 1955, so it was not a difficult interception. To top it all off, the 1000 kilowatt mediumwave transmitter on 1178 kHz was

only in use at night. Nothing more could have been done to ensure that Okinawa could be heard all the way to Finland. I have NHK from Okinawa on three frequencies and both commercial stations in the province, but VOA and the Ryukyu Islands country point were of course already gone before I knew anything about DX listening.

PORO POINT VOA Poro's background dates back to the Korean War, when the Americans established Wallace Air Base in the Philippines. The base's land naturally gave rise to a relay station to transmit the Voice of America to Southeast Asia as soon as the lines were set up in 1954. Thanks to Poro, Finland received a medium wave reply from the Philippines as early as 1957. In the 1990s, VOA Poro was split from its incorrectly tuned frequency of 1147 kHz. It was never admitted, but the split was obviously intentional, because Taiwan Fishery was making noise on 1143. In the late 1990s, the base was closed, the Poro short wave station was demolished, and the area was developed into a tourist trap. The Poro medium wave station was allowed to continue operating until March 2013.

TINANG The Tinang relay station, also in the Philippines, was born out of the Vietnam War. In 1966, Tinang was envisioned as VOA's new Asian center, replacing the likes of Poro and the old Malolos station. Malolos was a medium wave station that closed in 1967. 13 short wave transmitters and 39 antennas ensured that Tinang could be heard not only in Southeast Asia but all over the world. The eruption of Mount Pinatubo in 1991 briefly shut down Tinang, but it was not until President Trump's signature in pen that Tinang was finally silenced. With the shutdown of the transmitter tubes in Tinang, Radio Pilipinas has been left homeless.

SAO TOME A cooperation agreement was signed with Sao Tome & Principe in 1996, under which VOA built an efficient 600 kilowatt medium wave station. Although the frequency was 1530 kHz, which was heavily interfered with by Romania, VOA Pinheira could be heard even in Finland, if the conditions were favorable. In 2024, the station quietly ceased operations.



Gary Cooper, Mr Voice of America

TINIAN A new transmitter center was built on Tinian Island in the Marianas in 1996 to reach China's potential audience of one billion listeners. The Marianas had experience with shortwave stations. Saipan was once home to Superrock KYOI, which broadcast to Japan, and FEBC station KFBS. Hurricane Yutu leveled VOA's station in 2018. 16 curtain antennas fell and one support mast snapped. Major repairs were made, but the station never recovered from the impact. The Tinian and Sao Tome relays ceased operations in the last year of the Biden administration, in 2024.

MARATHON As a legacy of the failed Bay of Pigs invasion, VOA built a mediumwave station in the Florida Keys. The frequency 1180 kHz was used to reach listeners in Havana. The relay, which operated from 1962 to 2017, was either poorly or very poorly heard, as Cuba was broadcasting its own program, Radio Rebelde, on the same frequency. Hannu Niilekselä reported on the subject in more detail in Radiomailma issue 6/2022.

BETHANY In 1942, when VOA began operations, the US government practically nationalized existing American shortwave stations for its own use during the war. VOA's first radio station was built in Bethany, Ohio in 1943, from which programs were sent all over the world using Crosley transmitters. Bethany was in operation until 1994. Today, the antenna masts have been dismantled, but the transmitter building is still standing. Tourists entering through the door can explore the Voice Of America museum and the premises of the West Chester Amateur Radio Club.

DELANO The CBS-built shortwave station in Delano, California, opened in 1944. The location was carefully chosen for its Pacific broadcasts. The criteria were that the land could not be more than three miles from the coast, that the horizon could not be more than three degrees higher than the mountain peaks or other terrain obstacles, that the land had to be usable for a mile from east to west, and that the price had to be reasonable. Delano broadcast not only to the Pacific, but also to Japan and Korea, of course, and also carried programs for the Organization of American States. Delano last broadcast in October 2007.

DIXON The Dixon shortwave station, halfway between San Francisco and Sacramento, closed in 1983. I don't recall ever hearing about it. NBC built the station in 1944 and owned it until 1963, when it was transferred to VOA.

GREENVILLE The Edward R. Murrow Transmitting Center in Greenville, North Carolina, was ultimately VOA's main shortwave station on the American continent. It has been in operation to this day. The design took a

long time, and the criteria were a remote location, ease of power supply, and low-lying terrain. By the time it was finally opened in 1962, \$23 million had been spent, but it also meant saying goodbye to the old and underpowered wartime relays in Brentwood and Bound Brook. Kim Elliott broadcast his exciting Radiogram broadcasts from Greenville until he retired from VOA.

OTHER RELAYS

Voice Of America broadcasts have been carried by numerous different radio stations. If FM relays are included, a complete list is a hopeless task.

On AM, I have listened to VOA from some very surprising places:

MEYERTON South Africa's Sentech really tried to make the Meyerton shortwave station profitable. Airtime was sold to South African radio amateurs and various foreign services. In 1994, I reported to VOA Meyerton on frequency 4875. After the customer base dried up, the Meyerton transmitter complex was closed on March 31, 2019.

MOSCOW Relay that could not have been imagined before this, nor since. During Yeltsin's time, a single 75-kilowatt, underpowered by Soviet standards, small transmitter was installed in Moscow on the frequency 918 kHz to transmit the programming of various foreign services from the World Radio Network feed to foreigners and tourists living in Moscow. One of the stations being relayed was Voice Of America. I received Open Radio Moscow's response to my report from Washington in 1992.

PETROPAVLOVSK-KAMSHATSKY After the collapse of the Soviet Union, there was an opportunity to utilize the old transmitters of Radio Moscow and jammer stations for international broadcasting at a reduced price. It was a matter of taste whether to grab Radio Netherlands, Radio Canada International, or Voice Of America from Irkutsk and Petropavlovsk-Kamshatsky, which sent test broadcasts for a while before starting to rent airtime to Radio Free Asia. My own RFA QSL is a letter that acknowledged my report of a measurement break in the program transmission chain. The message repeated in the transmission was "Eto pervi kanal. Eto pervi kanal Radio Svobodnaja Asia." The exact QTH was never revealed, so it goes in my books as a clandestine station.

VIDIN During the Yugoslav wars, VOA acquired airtime from Bulgarian Radio. On frequency 1224, you could hear Serbian and other language broadcasts. Since I was missing the Bulgarian country point, I once again resorted to VOA's help in hunting countries. The QTH "Vidin via Bulgarian" written on the card tells you how well informed Washington was about the matter. It is valid nevertheless. At least one magic word was correct.

RM